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Faith in Leadership

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It's hard not to be astonished by the sheer breadth of Jim Hackett's achievements.

He attended the United States Air Force Academy, where he flew jets and was qualified as a glider pilot. He has an MBA from Harvard Business School. He worked as a field hand on an oil rig in the Texas panhandle. He's led several global energy companies. He served as chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas and was a graduate school professor at Rice University for seven years. He and his wife are philanthropists who've given millions to support health care, education, and the arts. He speaks Russian. He sounds almost like the character in a popular commercial: "The World's Most Interesting Man."



Jim Hackett, MTS '16.

Maybe it's no surprise, then, that Hackett, MTS '16, has also long harbored an interest in religion and theology. Still, many of his colleagues were shocked when the CEO stepped down in 2013 as head of the multibilliondollar Anadarko Petroleum Corp. to enroll at Harvard Divinity School. The newly minted HDS graduate says that his decision reflected a lifelong passion for valuesbased leadership.

"My mission is to change how we discuss and pursue spiritual values, not just secular ethics," Hackett said in 2015 of his decision to come to Harvard. "HDS has helped me in many ways in that regard, including with my plans to write a book on faith and leadership, and to teach undergraduates at Rice University or the University of Texas about religion, spirituality, and ethics."

Hackett's already putting that mission into action. Inspired by his experience at HDS, he turned his interest in faith and leadership into an extraordinary act of philanthropy: a \$2M gift to the School in 2016 to establish the Hackett Family Fund for One Harvard and a lecture fund at the Center for the Study of World Religions named in honor of Hackett's late father, Hugh.

HDS Dean David N. Hempton says that the Hackett Family Fund, which will support "teaching and research of religion and ethics by HDS faculty," particularly at Harvard College, will go a long way toward educating ethical,

religiously literate professionals in all fields.

“Knowledge of religion—and devoted men and women who draw on the vast resources of the world’s traditions—can yield more effective efforts to build peace and security, work for human rights, improve public health, and make lasting progress on many other critical challenges facing leaders today,” Hempton said. “Jim and Maureen’s extraordinary gift will support the work of HDS faculty, who teach 50 percent of undergraduate religion courses and who advise over 80 percent of Harvard’s doctoral students in the field. We are deeply grateful.”

A Passion for Faith—and for Interrogating It

Hackett is remarkably humble for someone so successful—and so generous. It may come from his upbringing in what he describes as a pretty “normal” middle-class family in Illinois. His father was a devout Roman Catholic, but Hackett describes his mother as “skeptical of organized religion.” The combination of perspectives resulted in Hackett’s passion for his faith—and for interrogating it.

“My father looked for almost any excuse to receive the Holy Eucharist and to attend Mass and pray,” he says. “But Mom’s ‘doubting Thomas’ approach

certainly helped me to explore comparative religions throughout my life.”

Hackett followed in the footsteps of his father, a pilot in the Army Air Corps, when he decided to attend the Air Force Academy. He was on track to fly jets until a sudden deterioration of his eyesight during his junior year forced him to let go of his dream. He finished college at the University of Illinois and embarked on a career in energy to utilize his Russian language skills. Soon after came an MBA from Harvard Business School and engineering studies at Boston University and the University of Houston.

When he was done with his education, Hackett took a leadership position at an energy company but realized before long that he was not “technically qualified” for the job. So, in his early 30s, he left the office of an executive to work for two years in the field and in several engineering disciplines—experience he says proved “critical” to his eventual positions as chairman, president, and CEO of Ocean Energy, COO of Devon Energy Corporation, and, finally, chairman of the board and CEO of Anadarko.

Perhaps it’s the HDS influence, but when Hackett speaks of his career, he sounds more like a philosopher and a theologian than the stereotype of a hard-driving businessman.

“Energy became interesting to me because it provided one of the four pillars of physical existence—the other three

being water, air, and food,” he says. “Other than nurturing our souls, I can’t imagine another field of education that is more important and accessible—in terms of information—than studying these four pillars of existence in some depth.”

A Failure of Leadership

Aside from his personal faith and lifelong interest in theology, Hackett says that two events—one big, one small—made him think seriously about divinity school. One was the collapse of Enron, a disaster that he attributed to “a failure in leadership” among people he knew well. The other was a curious interaction with a fellow alumnus at a Harvard Business School reunion who told Hackett that he “read the Bible every day, but didn’t believe in God.” Hackett says that both interactions made him see the need to reverse the disintegration of spiritual and secular values in the modern business world.

“The HBS alumnus in particular taught me something fundamental with his comments,” Hackett says. “He felt the Bible was a ‘survival manual’ for business. I believe a spiritual understanding of the Bible or any other great religious scripture should inspire one’s whole life and not become simply a competitive tool in a narrow secular setting. I think this alum was trying to do good and take inspiration from great works of moral philosophy. But, after a good deal of reflection, I don’t believe I could be convinced to depend on him to

steer a business properly before or during a crisis.”

Hackett enrolled at HDS as a special student in 2013, and then began full time in the School’s master of theological studies program in 2015. He says that it didn’t take long to recognize that he wasn’t in Houston anymore.

“On the first day of orientation, one of my classmates invited me to meditate with her,” he remembers. “She told me to close my eyes and hold onto her hands and we imagined another world together for 20 minutes. I have never done that with anyone before or since. I thank her for having an open heart and showing me the way.”

A Marriage of the Spiritual and the Secular

At HDS, Hackett explored the lessons that religion and theology offer to leaders—whether of congregations, communities, or multinational corporations. He says that the flexibility of the School’s curriculum and the support of faculty enabled him to pursue his interest in integrating spiritual values and secular ethics.

“Professor Michelle Sanchez, Father Frank Clooney, Associate Dean Emily Click, and Professor Catherine Brekus aided me in my quest to learn more about the intersection of capitalism and moral precepts,” he says. “I am grateful to each,

and to the professors that educated me in other essential areas of religious understanding at the Divinity School.”

The alumnus now of two of Harvard’s graduate schools, Hackett enthusiastically supports crossfaculty collaboration and President Drew Faust’s goal of “One Harvard.” He says that the aim of the Hackett Family Fund is to keep HDS—and Harvard—in a “preeminent academic position.”

“A major academic university must be diversified enough to gain and keep its reputation,” he says. “That fact often leads to selected schools within the same university having to indirectly support the good work of other less prosperous schools. One Harvard—and President Faust, particularly—is best equipped to make decisions on which schools should get the proper direct and indirect support.”

Hackett says that he still plans to write a book on faith and leadership, though as a first-person narrative rather than as a “how to” business book. He says that he hopes to encourage business leaders to look at their professions as “sacred missions.”

“Businesses ought to be human spaces, where one’s spirituality can be owned as part of exhibiting one’s authentic leadership, but without imposing the same spiritual and religious beliefs on others,” he says. “An integration of the sacred and secular is a competitive

advantage in business—not necessarily at all times, but in most, and certainly over the span of one’s career and, most importantly, one’s lifetime.”

—by *Paul Massari*

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